

The experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students: Structural discrimination and microaggressions

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The experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students: Structural discrimination and microaggressions

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Abstract

This paper documents forms of discrimination that students with diverse-gender identities face within the New Zealand tertiary environment, and reports on students' suggestions for strategies to support the normalisation of gender diversity. Findings from this qualitative study are based on data collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven participants. They indicate that although participants did not generally experience discrimination through direct attacks or violence, the negative effects of gender-normativity and of administrative processes that were not suitable, as well as a lack of staff awareness about the needs of diverse-gender students, comprise discrimination through ever-present microaggressions. Findings also highlight the resilience of diverse-gender students and their ability to develop personal strategies to manage their experiences of being part of a marginalised group. Strategies that participants identified to help create authentic inclusive tertiary environments include increasing the visibility of diverse-gender identities within policies, processes and curricula, and developing educational programmes for staff on the unique needs of the diverse-gender population. This paper evidences structural discrimination that pervades most of society in relation to gender diversity, and suggests that it could be addressed fairly easily within the tertiary sector by those who manage its systems, pending education and awareness.

Introduction

This study investigated the experiences of students with diverse-gender identities within the New Zealand tertiary environment. It was undertaken in partial fulfilment of a Master of Education degree at Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand, from which the primary author, Catherine Powell, graduated in 2017. The second author, Helen Gremillion, was Catherine's principal supervisor. The aim of the study was to hear directly from the participants whether they had experienced discrimination in relation to their gender identities; what kinds of discrimination, if any, were occurring; and whether participants believed specific strategies might support an inclusive tertiary environment for diverse-gender students. As the diverse-gender community is becoming increasingly visible, a growing awareness is developing about the issues these people face (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Due to this visibility, New Zealand tertiary education providers are among the many communities seeking to create inclusive environments so all can find their place to belong within these institutions.

Gender diverse people do not fit into the binary model of gender. Gender diversity is inclusive of, but not limited to, people who are intersex, trans, transsexual, transgender, takatāpui, whakāwahine, tangata ira tane, fa'afafine, akava'ine, fakaleiti, māhū, vaka sa lewa lewa, fiafifine and genderqueer.¹ Regardless of their specific identification, they share the experience of challenging traditional gender norms and because of this, face high rates of discrimination and marginalisation (Case, Kanenberg, Erich, & Tittsworth, 2012).

The New Zealand Youth '12 survey found that one in every 25 high-school students either identifies with a diverse-gender identity or is questioning their gender identity (Clark et al., 2014). The survey showed that young diverse-gender people face discrimination in their day-to-day lives that impacts on their wellbeing in many ways. Some of the ways this discrimination occurs are: increased levels of bullying, exclusion, and lack of access to health care. More than half of diverse-gender high-school students are afraid that someone at school will bully or hurt them, with 50% having experienced violence. The report from this survey also notes that these experiences follow students into tertiary study.

Numerous studies and reports demonstrate the discrimination and marginalisation diverse-gender people face around the world (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Burdge, 2007; Case et al., 2012; Cegler, 2012; Clark et al., 2014; Courvant, 2011; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Otago University Students Association, 2003; Rands, 2009; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). This study is the first research project to focus solely on the experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students in New Zealand or Australia.

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These are terms that describe some of the many different identities within the diverse-gender community. They include Māori, Samoan, Fijian and Cook Island terms.

Research Aims

The following objectives framed the study:

1. To examine whether diverse-gender students experience discrimination related to their gender identities within tertiary settings in New Zealand and, if so, to identify the ways in which this discrimination occurs.
2. To identify strategies that support the inclusion of diverse-gender students within tertiary settings.

Because this study sought to understand the experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students, it was important to ensure that the voices of these students were central to the research. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) report that members of the diverse-gender community often experience a reduced sense of personal agency. The design of this project focused on ensuring the participants could actively engage and decide which stories they wanted to share about how their gender identities impact on their experiences in tertiary settings. The chosen method of data collection, in-depth semi-structured interviews, allows for an evolving dialogue and the creation of space for participants to share not only their experiences of discrimination, but also the strategies that they created in response (Gamson, 2000).

Literature Review

This area of research is an emerging one; there are a limited number of studies available within the New Zealand context. Several overseas studies include diverse-gender identities along with diverse sexualities when looking at the experiences of tertiary students (Renn, 2007; Skene, Hogan, de Vries, & Goody, 2008; Valentine, Wood, & Plummer, 2009). In addition, two studies in New Zealand cover the experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students (Riches, 2011; Woods, 2013). However, all these studies tend to focus more on the experiences of students with diverse sexual identities.

A few overseas studies report specifically on the experiences of diverse-gender tertiary students (Case et al., 2012; Efrigg et al., 2011; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Although the current study is the first in New Zealand to focus solely on tertiary environments, a New Zealand report was published identifying the discrimination faced by diverse-gender people in all areas of society (Human Rights Commission, 2008). Also a study of the health and wellbeing of diverse-gender students in New Zealand high schools has been published (Clark et al., 2014).

Below is a discussion of three significant broad themes that figure prominently in this literature. These are: the power of gender normativity, and how diverse-gender students challenge these norms; the discrimination that occurs when social norms are not adhered to; and the strategies that have been developed by diverse-gender people and their allies to navigate the challenges they face as a minority group.

Gender normativity

GENDER NORMS

The first step in a discussion of gender norms is to define what is meant by the term 'gender'. It is useful to clarify the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is a term used to describe the biological body and is usually assigned at birth. Two main options are currently available: male and female. Gender, however, is a set of socially prescribed roles and attributes. Fryer (2012) states that the "social roles taken on by men and woman are not rooted in biology but are, rather, products of socialization" (p. 41).

Rands (2009) describes how gender norms are maintained through a "system of power relations with privileges and punishments" (p. 420). This description indicates that gender norms are not only socially constructed, but also kept in place by rewarding those who conform and punishing those who deviate. The underlying assumption that motivates gender normativity is the belief that gender should map neatly onto sex, and that both are binary categories. Fryer (2012) notes that "even within the arguments about whether gender is an 'internal essence' or an 'outer category' the assumption is still that there is male and there is female" (p. 41). The idea that only two natural biological states exist – male and female – has been a dominant discourse within Western culture that has shaped understandings of gender for many years. However recent research challenges this discourse. Fausto-Sterling (2016) reports findings of a research project that explored alternative ways of studying biological sex, moving past a binary model of sex and showing how gender can articulate with sex in multifarious ways. She argues that sex exists on a continuum, and that "behaviours and biology are different manifestations of the same complex system" (p. 13).

DIVERSE GENDER IDENTITIES

Diverse-gender people do not fit into the binary model of gender, which is, as noted above, typically understood as flowing 'naturally' from a binary model of sex. They may identify as transgender, intersex, genderfluid, genderqueer or in other ways. In one American study of diverse-gender students, over 100 different gender identities were discovered among participants (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Regardless of their specific identification, they shared the experience of challenging traditional gender norms (Case et al., 2012). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that under-20-year-olds identifying as gender diverse still go through the discrimination, harassment, and assaults of previous generations; however, they also have more connections to resources and are more aware of their needs than were previous generations.

Discrimination

DISCRIMINATION IN RELATION TO DIVERSE GENDER IDENTITIES

Discrimination towards diverse-gender people occurs when the majority consciously or unconsciously holds an idea of gender normativity and treats

those who do not adhere to society's gender norms differently compared with those who do conform (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Effrig et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008). Burdge (2007) states that behaviours and beliefs that do not conform to socially-imposed gender roles attract discrimination from the dominant group. Thus, it is gender non-conformity that puts diverse-gender people at risk.

Often such discrimination is justified by the belief that diverse-gender individuals deviate from the rules of nature; that is, they are seen as unnatural (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013). Many studies provide evidence of the marginalisation and abuse of diverse-gender people in all areas of society (Case et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2014; Effrig et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Rossiter, 2014). Generally, this discriminatory behaviour from the majority could be described as diverse-gender people receiving negative attention for behaving in ways that are considered inappropriate for their presumed gender in terms of clothing, manner of speech, bathroom use and so on (Rands, 2009). Marginalisation can also occur because diverse-gender people are misunderstood, overlooked, or invalidated, again for not behaving in line with society's gender norms (Burdge, 2007).

As well as individual discrimination, there are many examples of institutional discrimination. Diverse-gender tertiary students often do not have access to appropriate housing, bathrooms, health centres, or administrative systems (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Clark et al., 2014; Human Rights Commission, 2008; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013; Spade, 2011). For example, when an application form asks for one's gender but offers only 'male' or 'female', not only are sex and gender conflated, but also anyone outside the gender binary is rendered invisible and receives the message they do not belong. Another difficulty can occur when students wish to change their name and/or sex on academic records (Human Rights Commission, 2008). These changes can be difficult to implement because the relevant staff are unsure of the process or there are simply no systems in place to facilitate the required changes.

Another example of institutional discrimination is the lack of content that includes diverse-gender people within the courses and programmes in which students are participating (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Rands, 2009). This gap in material means that it is challenging for diverse-gender students to see themselves reflected in curricula.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions is a term that describes small but regular insults, dismissals, and general hostility experienced by racial minorities (Fleras, 2016). Recently it has also been used to describe the negative experiences of diverse-gender people. Microaggressions describe the kinds of comments and experiences that, on their own, do not create significant harm, but when repeatedly experienced can cause stress and anxiety.

New Zealand diverse-gender high-school students reported receiving negative comments from both other students and staff when they used bathrooms that others felt did not match their gender (Human Rights Commission, 2008). There are also examples of staff who have failed to intervene when other students have made hurtful comments (Rands, 2009). Varying degrees of inappropriate comments have been reported, ranging

from unintentionally hurtful remarks to intentional harassment and bullying. Diverse-gender tertiary students overseas report experiencing the former – microaggressions – in all aspects of their day-to-day interactions on campus, whether it be within the curriculum content and delivery, when seeking career advice and health services, or simply socialising between classes (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). This form of exclusion and marginalisation creates stress in people who are constantly exposed over long periods.

MINORITY STRESS

Minority stress is a concept that was developed to explain the experiences of racially marginalised groups. Meyer (2003) also started applying the concept to people of diverse sexualities when examining their health outcomes. Minority stress is a recognised response when a person's values are in a state of conflict with those of the dominant culture. It stems from experiencing discrimination, expecting rejection and enacting concealment (Dispenza, Brown, & Chastain, 2016).

Studies have shown that diverse-gender tertiary students have elevated rates of distress compared with their gender-conforming, or cisgender,² counterparts (Effrig et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008). A New Zealand survey reporting on the health and wellbeing of high-school students found that although the diverse-gender group is numerically small (around 5% of students) its members faced significant wellbeing disparities compared with cisgender students. Their experiences included lower confidence levels, higher depression and suicide rates, bullying, and lower rates of perceiving that a parent cares for them (Clark et al., 2014).

Strategies to create inclusive environments

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

When considering the various strategies suggested in the literature, focusing on the physical environment consistently appears as a priority, and includes appropriate access to bathrooms, housing and healthcare (Case et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2014; Effrig et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008; Otago University Students Association, 2003; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). By creating a physical environment in which students can use a bathroom without fear, and have access both to living environments that are safe from harassment and to healthcare providers who are knowledgeable about the unique needs of diverse-gender people, tertiary providers are removing the first level of barriers to diverse-gender students' inclusion and engagement (Effrig et al., 2011; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

When looking at the lives of diverse-gender young people, studies have also noted these students often arrive at institutions with an expectation of being excluded because of their experiences in high school and in the wider society (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Clark et al., 2014). Ways to provide a sense of connection with others, whether in a physical 'rainbow space' or through social connections via groups and activities, are suggested to assist in addressing the need for acceptance and belonging (Case et al., 2012; Cegler,

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Cisgender is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

2012; Effrig et al., 2011; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Skene et al., 2008; Woods, 2013).

The literature also points to the need for overt inclusion of diverse-gender identities within tertiary institutes' policies and practices (Case et al., 2012; Cegler, 2012; Effrig et al., 2011; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Skene et al., 2008). Policies and practices are linked to the physical environment in that they protect its safety. Most tertiary providers have anti-harassment policies; however, few directly mention gender identity and expression. This omission leaves the 'sex' category within such policies open to interpretation and adds to the invisibility of this group of students.

ABILITY TO SELF-IDENTIFY

Burdge (2007) states that "it is empowering for oppressed groups to control the language representing them" (p. 244). There are many occasions when tertiary students are asked to identify their gender, however often there are usually only two options from which to choose. Such a limited choice does not acknowledge the fact that there is a huge range of gender identities currently in use. As noted above, in one American study of diverse-gender students, over 100 different gender identities were discovered among the participants (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). A key strategy for supporting diverse-gender students is to create processes in which they can choose appropriate words to describe their gender identities.

AWARENESS OF DIVERSITY AND CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS

It is recognised that even when changes are made to physical environments, policies, and practices, if the people within tertiary institutes are unaware of gender-conforming privilege and its impact on the diverse-gender community, the required culture shift will not occur (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). One way to increase awareness and challenge gender norms is to use gender-inclusive language (Burdge, 2007; Burford, Lucassen, Penniket, & Hamilton, 2013; Case et al., 2012; Macdonald, 2011). Burdge (2007) suggests that those wishing to create inclusive environments need to use inclusive language and challenge others when they use gender stereotypes. If enacted effectively this strategy can educate others but also create alliances. It points to the importance of education occurring not only in the classroom, but also through individual actions in all areas of people's lives.

Methods and Methodology

This qualitative study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It has been suggested that for a study of this nature, a sample size of five to eight participants is large enough to provide a rich data set (Tracy, 2012). Notices were circulated via social media and other electronic networks; respondents self-identified as gender diverse and volunteered to be part of the study. Seven participants were selected, from seven different institutions.

An inductive analysis model was chosen that could allow the data to drive the analysis, and could enable patterns to emerge from the many different

concepts and insights in the data (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed identification of themes both within the individual data sets from each participant, and across the entire data set (Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, & Frey, 2013). The six-phase analysis process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to create a transparent process: 1. Familiarise self with the data; 2. Generate initial codes; 3. Search for themes; 4. Review themes; 5. Define and name themes; and 6. Produce the report.

Findings

DISCRIMINATION

The first research question asked whether participants experienced discrimination, and if they did, what kind(s). Discrimination is often described as someone being treated unfairly or as 'less than' another person in the same situation. The most interesting finding from the interviews is that six out of seven participants reported no discrimination experienced. This response reflected the fact that the six participants had not experienced people behaving towards them in directly unkind or violent ways. As one participant put it, "...there are no tomatoes being thrown, I've never had any slurs thrown at me that I am aware of". However, what became apparent when analysing the findings was that all participants were treated differently, and in unwelcome ways, from their gender-conforming peers in a variety of ways throughout their tertiary education. Despite reports of not experiencing discrimination, there is consistent evidence in the data that all participants have been discriminated against because of their gender identities.

Participants' experiences of discrimination were wide ranging; however, three main areas stood out as impacting all of them: the effects of gender normativity, problematic administrative processes, and a lack of staff awareness. It also became apparent that ongoing, mostly covert, discrimination had a negative impact on the participants, creating the experience of minority stress.

GENDER NORMATIVITY

Gender norms can lead to incorrect assumptions and comments reflecting an expectation that everyone should conform to a binary model of gender. Participants reported the impact of incorrect pronoun use as well as being challenged for using the 'wrong' public facilities. They also reported the need to 'self-edit' to avoid confrontation in the face of others' incorrect assumptions.

One way these assumptions manifest is others using a pronoun that does not match the gender identity of the person referred to. This phenomenon can be described as 'misgendering'. Lennox,³ who identifies as genderqueer⁴ and uses they/them pronouns, spoke about the effect of people using female pronouns to refer to them:

I feel that female pronouns are much too heavily weighted in terms of gender. To me, it feels like the pronoun takes the societal expectations of what we consider to be a woman and places it upon me like a mantle I'm

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Pseudonyms are used for all participants; gender identities and pronouns remain unchanged.

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A person who identifies with neither, both, or a combination of masculine and feminine genders.

supposed to uphold. It makes me very uncomfortable, especially when referred to as 'that girl' or 'that lady'.

Most of the participants spoke about the need to speak up about their gender identities to avoid being misgendered. Due to gender norms, it is often assumed that people are cisgendered and if they are not, it is seen as the responsibility of those with a diverse gender identity to disclose to the person making the incorrect assumption. In addition to needing to disclose their gender identities, participants also reported incidents in which, even after such disclosure, they still experienced staff making inappropriate assumptions about pronouns. Tatum, a transmasculine person who uses they/them pronouns shared their experiences in the classroom:

I did have a few problematic incidents like I had one of my lecturers who thought it was alright to call trans people "it" and that we liked being referred to as "it". So, I had to basically give the class a lesson in pronouns that day.

In addition to incorrect pronoun use, many participants talked about their fear that others would challenge their use of a bathroom. Jay, who identifies as agender⁵ and uses he/him pronouns, described an incident when he was trying to use a bathroom that had a wheelchair sign on it as there were no other gender-neutral toilets available:

I remember one woman, you have to push the door button and wait for [the toilet door] to close and I pushed the button and I was waiting for it to close and this woman pokes her head in and goes, oh are you allowed to use the handicapped ones? And I go, it's also for gender neutral stuff. And the door is closing and I'm bursting and really uncomfortable and she's like, what? [and I think] I have to pee! Can you get your head out of the door because I just want to pee in peace! And this is not your business!

Although this question about bathroom use may seem appropriate to some, the above is a clear example of how incorrect assumptions about gender, due to gender norms, create intrusions into diverse-gender people's lives that often result in embarrassment and frustration. One coping strategy participants developed in response was 'self-editing': at times, they would consciously choose to conform to gender norms to avoid being challenged. This response often led to the experience of a dual identity with different names and pronouns being used in different settings. Jay explained:

I've got two mes. There is the legal me and then there is the real me. And because of certain legalities I'm stuck with the legal me and can't quite shake it but I try to keep it in the background as much as possible.

Overall it was clear that gender normativity created a range of challenges including others making incorrect assumptions about the participants, the issue of when to disclose one's gender identity to others, and the self-editing that occurred as participants navigated their way through their educational experience.

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

All participants spoke about the challenges they faced navigating administrative systems in tertiary environments. Three areas emerged as the most commonly reported areas of concern: the correct recording of gender and names during the application process; the rigidity of current enrolment systems; and a general sense that including the diverse-gender population within administrative processes was not a priority for tertiary staff.

Many of the participants are known by names that are different from their legal names. While it was acknowledged that what constitutes a legal name is outside the direct influence of the tertiary provider, participants often verbalised frustration about a perceived lack of willingness by staff to solve the problem of how to prioritise chosen over legal names. Jay spoke of his experience working with staff to record a name that is different from that on his birth certificate, and of his frustration when told that it was not possible:

I think, my personal feeling is, as a university administrator you really do want to stick to the legislation ... you want to be seen to be doing what you have to do by law and I would characterise them as relatively conservative in terms of legalities ... so people are sticking to what they know rather than trying to branch out into new things where there is no legislation around it.

Similar bureaucratic challenges were also mentioned in relation to how tertiary providers record gender during the application process. Most participants commented on their discomfort at being presented with only two options, male and female,⁶ when completing the application forms. Jay sums up the participants' overall reactions when describing his response to seeing these two options on forms: "Actually I can't answer this question because there is no option for me!" This sense of being either invisible or excluded was mentioned by many of the participants when discussing requests to identify their gender on different forms and surveys.

Participants also reported that administrative systems were often inadequate when it came to ensuring they were referred to by the correct name. Some tertiary systems had a process in place for listing a 'preferred' name; however, this option did not always ensure the student was referred to by this name. A number of participants identified the practice of passing around a roll for students to sign at the start of class as problematic, as it often had legal names recorded instead of chosen names. These uncomfortable situations also seemed to create opportunities for diverse-gender students to support each other. Consider, for example, Lennox's response to their friend's legal name being on the class roll:

... I usually sit next to them, and every time that roll comes round it's always wrong. It's always under the name that they are registered under, not their preferred name. I have taken to getting it before they do, erasing it as much as I can and writing it in correctly and making a note for them to please change it and then passing it [on]. They appreciate it because it is literally every time we go to the workshop. They shouldn't have to deal with that.

Several participants talked about their preferred name being listed but lecturers still reading out their legal names. When asked why they thought this happened, participants attributed the behaviour to lack of awareness about the importance of the student being referred to by their correct name.

LACK OF STAFF AWARENESS

Another key finding from the study is the general lack of staff awareness in relation to the diverse-gender population. All participants reported providing gender-diversity education to staff simply to give a basic understanding about their needs in relation to their gender identities. Participants reported that although some staff did demonstrate a level of awareness about diverse-gender people, this knowledge was probably attributable to their field of expertise rather than any general teacher-education programmes.

Several participants reported challenges when interacting with staff. For instance, Tatum found it challenging when explaining to a staff member the importance of using they/them pronouns, finding that “she was more focused on the grammar than using gender neutral pronouns and the effect it has on students.” Tatum went on to talk about their hesitation in taking on the role of educator:

If I knew they were all getting diversity training I would probably be more open to speaking. I don't think the students should be the ones to educate their lecturers ... because I don't think it's our job. You can just go on Google.

Many participants reported that this educational role was an energy drain that distracted them from their own studies.

MINORITY STRESS

Minority stress occurs when a person is part of a marginalised group and their values conflict with those of the dominant, or majority, culture (Dispenza, Brown, & Chastain, 2016). This stress response and the hypervigilance linked to it stem from experiencing discrimination, working to conceal a part of oneself that is not in line with majority values, and the expectation of rejection if concealment is not successful. All participants reported some level of stress directly related to how others interacted with them, and a need to remain on ‘high-alert’ for possible discrimination.

All those interviewed were aware that prejudice and discrimination occur in other settings and all were, to varying degrees, on guard and ready for such occurrences during their tertiary experience. One of the ways this hypervigilance manifested was through participants not doing certain things that would disclose their gender identities, for fear of future consequences. Lennox explains why they do not disclose their genderqueer identity to everyone. “People would probably start avoiding me, because when people don't understand something, often times they will just avoid it altogether ... to avoid trying to understand it or just because they are frightened about a new concept, which I understand.”

Most of the participants reported some level of awareness about how these experiences negatively impact their confidence levels. Tania reported feeling concerned even when the comments being made were

meant to be positive: "...I came in and one of the lecturers ... said, 'Oh you bring flamboyance to [tertiary provider]' And I said, 'Oh my gosh am I overdressed?'" Although the staff member reassured her that this remark was meant as a compliment, Tania's immediate response was to assume she had done something wrong. Tania's response mirrored other comments from participants who often reported a desire to 'fit in'.

Jay described how the feeling of many small but hurtful interactions builds up during the day:

It's when it piles up all day. That's exactly what microaggressions do. If you say to me, "Is your name really [name omitted]?" I can laugh it off but if you are the 50th person to ask me that today, that piles up and it's hard. And it's chipping away. That's what microaggressions do. You can't legislate against microaggressions because people don't know they are doing it. And it's so hard to pin it down too. ... You can't legislate it ... you can only educate.

In addition to the negative comments and questions participants reported experiencing, unspoken expectations also became apparent. A few of the participants reported feeling that others expected them to disclose their gender identities and that if they didn't they would be perceived as being deceitful. Tatum spoke about this issue in relation to both sexuality and gender identities:

Queer people in the class always have to come out but ... it's just assumed that you can stay silent if you are a heterosexual or cisgendered. It's not a big thing but we are almost expected to declare our [identities] every single time.

Participants regularly expressed frustration that they would often be treated differently from those in the majority, along with a sense of resignation that nothing would change.

Overall the study found that much of the discrimination experienced was connected to how societal gender norms are woven throughout tertiary education structures and appear in staff attitudes. As Lucy says:

It's silent. The discrimination is silent. It's evasive ... and the minute you are not heard or you are not represented, that is when this invisible discrimination starts to happen. And there is no more insidious discrimination than people forgetting you are there.

Although the participants did not use the term minority stress to describe their experiences, there is clear evidence that a heightened sense of vigilance was required for them to move through their tertiary studies in ways that worked for them. They developed many helpful strategies for managing this stress, but they were also often left tired and at times frustrated or even anxious.

STRATEGIES

In addition to identifying the types of discrimination that were occurring, this study identified strategies that support inclusive practice for diverse-gender tertiary students (research question 2). These findings can be divided into

two categories. First are the personal strategies participants developed, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability required to succeed in the current tertiary environment. Second are the strategies participants identified as being useful for creating inclusive environments. These latter fall into two main groupings: visibility of diverse-gender people within policies and processes, and education for staff about the needs of diverse-gender students.

PERSONAL STRATEGIES

All participants created ways to develop strong social connections with other students and staff. For some participants, creating social connections meant finding places where they could go to relax and feel comfortable. Lennox described how one space at their university felt like being at home, where they could focus on studying. "I actually just really liked the environment there. It's quite comfortable; I don't feel pressured by any of the students around me." Sam joined the queer group on campus to find a space that felt comfortable and enjoyed the social activities and charity work the group arranged during the year. Sam found in that environment she could relax and did not feel the need to self-edit in the same way as with other groups, due to the level of acceptance. Sam described the queer groups thus: "It's like a safe place to go so you don't have people judging you or getting up in arms about [your gender expression] as well."

However, not all participants wanted to belong to a queer group because of the dynamics that can occur within such groups. Tatum talked about finding the queer groups on their campus "quite cliquy", noting that "competition starts arising between the different queer groups on campus so I have just stayed away from those."

Tatum went on to describe a phenomenon that almost half the participants raised during the interviews – gay students who were not inclusive of diverse-gender students directing the queer spaces:

I notice in the queer groups on campus you get the same thing, you get queer groups of people who are happy to reinforce cisnormative stuff because it suits them. All the groups that are like, pro-gay marriage or something which is good for them but they won't engage in any activism which will actually help other people.

Another strategy many participants often discussed was their awareness that other people's opinions about them do not need to have a bearing on how they see themselves. Tania describes clearly how she focused on not letting others' reactions upset her:

I think for me I don't really care if they watch me or if they don't. I'm at the stage where I am just concentrating on my studies and what is important to me. I don't really care what people say, I've got to that stage where I am strong enough to not care, it doesn't matter what they think or what they say, it doesn't matter to me anymore. What matters are the people ... I care for and who care about me. I used to care a lot before.... To be strong ... I just block it out ... and you have to learn all those things to survive.

For several participants such as Tania, the ability to set clear boundaries was reported as an effective strategy for remaining positive and staying focused on personal study goals. Along with the ability to create strong social connections with others, participants thus demonstrated a high level of personal resilience to address the challenges they faced due to their diverse-gender identities.

VISIBILITY OF DIVERSE-GENDER PEOPLE

When participants were asked what strategies support inclusive practice in tertiary education, the strongest response was related to visibility of diverse-gender identities in all areas of tertiary life. They reported that visibility promoted a sense of belonging and feeling valued.

Several participants mentioned that having their correct gender and name recorded in the system makes a big difference. Lennox described an example of how tertiary institutes could ensure the correct data are gathered.

University forms should have a third option for gender with a box for preferred label (if any), along with a dropdown menu for preferred pronouns and a space beside your legal name for your preferred name if it hasn't been changed legally. That way, your academic transcripts would be correct for you and who you are.

While most participants wanted the ability to have their correct gender identities recorded on their files, some participants challenged the need for collecting data regarding gender at all. Jay suggested those gathering the data should consider not only how they collect gender details, but also whether they were relevant for each situation.

I think that a lot of the forms that you end up having to fill in online have a binary gender option on them and I think there should either be another option or they should scrap gender completely. Because why do you need to know?

However, overall, participants reported that increasing the visibility of diverse genders is a way of demonstrating to this population that they are considered important and that the tertiary provider is genuinely committed to creating inclusive environments.

STAFF EDUCATION

A strong link was found between the need to increase the visibility of diverse-gender students and the importance of providing diversity education for staff. All participants reported the positive impact of encountering staff who have an awareness of diverse-gender identities. Staff demonstrated this awareness through their language and behaviours, and these actions contributed to an environment where the participants felt acknowledged and supported.

Tania was taught by a staff member who could link her to suitable health providers through the institute's professional networks when she was having problems accessing appropriate medical support.

Actually [name omitted] was really good in helping, in fact, she was very good at helping me get onto my pills ... she talked with one doctor at the [tertiary provider] clinic ... that's how I came to be on the hormones, so I

just started this year.

Although all participants reported some positive experiences in relation to staff awareness about diverse-gender identities, they also acknowledged that these were not representative of their experiences with most staff. Jay's comment reflects the general feeling of all participants: "She's an inclusive person who happens to work for the university, it's not that the university happens to be inclusive."

The findings demonstrated the importance of ensuring a wide range of voices were heard when creating educational sessions that increased staff capability for the diverse-gender population. Tania highlighted the importance of ensuring multiple perspectives were heard to increase the effectiveness of inclusive practice. She suggested "more training which actually involves the students because a lot of the time training is provided by one person who gives their viewpoint on the issue and it becomes one-sided". Matua also commented on the challenge of recognising that the diverse-gender community does not speak with one voice:

Everybody is different. Even [within] our trans community [people] are extremely different. I find it hard because the spectrum is so broad, I could say one thing and the people next to me who are trans could say, "No that's not what I want." It's really tough.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate that participants experienced discrimination – primarily microaggressions – within the tertiary environment because of their gender identities. These microaggressions were primarily related to gender norms, administrative processes that were not suitable and a lack of staff awareness about the needs of diverse-gender students. These findings align with the literature that reports diverse-gender people experiencing discrimination in all areas of life (Case et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2014; Effrig et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Rossiter, 2014). The current study also shows that participants developed comprehensive personal strategies to manage the stress that discrimination creates. Finally, participants demonstrated a clear understanding of what institutional strategies work for them, or would work if implemented. These focus mainly on increasing the visibility of diverse-gender people within the institution and providing diversity education for staff. In line with the Human Rights Commission (2008) findings, the participants in this study are not seeking any special treatment; they simply wish to be treated with the same dignity and respect that their gender-conforming peers receive.

Conclusions

Four key conclusions arise from the findings of this study that connect to the research questions about discrimination and inclusive strategies. The first conclusion is related to diverse-gender students themselves and the other

three are related to the tertiary environment.

DIVERSE-GENDER STUDENTS INCREASINGLY EXPECT TO BE INCLUDED
Findings indicate that all the participants had a clear understanding of their right to be included within tertiary environments. The participants reported clear examples of when they felt excluded and how this problem could be resolved. The literature links this increasing demand for inclusive education to the growing refusal of the diverse-gender community to accept cultural, legal and political barriers in all areas of life (Spade, 2011). Participants demonstrated a range of skills that both created a sense of personal security for themselves and ensured others were aware of how to create inclusive environments. As diverse-gender students continue to choose places where they feel secure and included, it will be important for staff to increase their awareness of what this population requires.

THERE IS A LACK OF STAFF AWARENESS ABOUT DIVERSE GENDER IDENTITIES

The participants' experiences in all the tertiary environments demonstrated that staff, in general, were either not aware of how to include diverse-gender people, or lacked the motivation or confidence to make the necessary changes required. Overall, staff appeared willing to hear about diverse-gender students' experiences and to learn from them. However, this willingness often left diverse-gender students receiving attention that separated them from their cisgender peers. Participants talked about feeling uncomfortable when staff and other students expected them to be responsible for upskilling the cisgender population. This form of 'othering' highlights how diverse-gender people do not fit the gender norms and can sometimes be seen as odd or unusual (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013). As staff increase their awareness of gender diversity they will also start to see how gender norms impact all areas of the educational environment.

GENDER NORMS ARE REINFORCED IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS AND IN CURRICULA

The findings showed a lack of visibility of diverse-gender people within policies and processes, and clearly demonstrated how binary gender norms are woven throughout educational systems. This socialisation of gender norms is often invisible to those who conform, so these norms are unconsciously reinforced in both educational systems and curricula (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013). The literature suggests that staff could usefully consider how gender norms are perpetuated in language within classroom activities and course content (Spade, 2011). This increased awareness may provide the opportunity for staff to adjust some of the unconscious messages that have been delivered about binary gender norms. Until such changes occur, gender norms will continue to be reinforced overtly and covertly in many aspects of tertiary education.

THERE IS A LACK OF RESEARCH ABOUT BEST PRACTICE

Within educational settings, little research informs practice in relation to diverse-gender inclusion. This lack of research and debate connected to best practice for inclusivity could explain the participants' perception that there

is a lack of attention being paid to their needs. Rands (2009) acknowledges the lack of research as problematic given that diverse-gender people are participating in all levels of the educational system. Unless tertiary providers are aware of diverse-gender students' experiences, these students will continue to experience marginalisation and barriers to reaching their full potential.

Tertiary providers often make public comments about providing inclusive environments; however, as noted, there is very little research about what best practice in this area looks like. Rands (2009) states that all teacher-education programmes should be designed to ensure that staff know how to support the growth of diverse-gender students. This study may provide some direction for tertiary providers who are working towards inclusive practice. It is important that the focus remains on the power and privilege of the majority inherent in the educational system (gender-conforming privilege) to avoid placing the burden of change on the diverse-gender community. In this model of change, instead of a focus on empowering diverse-gender people to deal with the challenges gender norms create, the focus is on changing social systems to reflect gender diversity so that all can feel authentically included.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have led to the development of four recommendations. The table below shows the links between the study findings, the conclusions, and these recommendations.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS IN RESPONSE TO FINDINGS

<i>Study findings</i>	<i>Conclusions</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>
Students experiencing minority stress and the personal strategies they have developed in response.	Diverse-gender students increasingly expect to be included.	That tertiary providers recognise the impact that gender norms have on diverse-gender students and work to normalise gender diversity.
Lack of diversity education for staff.	There is a lack of staff awareness about diverse-gender identities.	That tertiary providers deliver educational programmes for staff that support the active creation of inclusive environments for diverse-gender students.
Gender normativity and the lack of visibility of diverse-gender identities in policies and processes.	Gender norms are reinforced in administrative systems and curricula.	That institutions investigate policies, processes and curricula to ascertain areas where diverse-gender identities require inclusion.
Perceived lack of support from staff for the diverse-gender community.	There is a lack of research about best practice.	That research scholarships be established for diverse-gender researchers to support increased research within the community and create events where findings relating to diverse-gender studies can be shared.

Whilst these recommendations focus on increasing the visibility of diverse-gender people within the tertiary environment it is important to note that educational practitioners also need to protect students' right to self-determination and therefore protect the right to remain invisible for those who wish to. Cisnormativity still permeates educational institutions. Therefore, visibility does not equal safety (Burford, MacDonald, Orchard, & Wills, 2015). Visibility is not inherently good and those wishing to remain invisible have as much right to do so as those wishing to be seen. There is no easy answer to this challenge. Ideally everyone will find a place to stand and know they are valued and respected.

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